

# Researchers Seek To Learn More About Mysterious Bat Illness as It Spreads Toward Michigan

**Bats:** From page 1

"The little brown bat [will be effected] primarily, because you go into the mines of the Western Upper Peninsula and we have some mines up there with 50,000 of them hibernating," said Eastern Michigan University biology professor Allen Kurta. "The big brown bats are present, but usually in smaller numbers. They're harder and they can hibernate in a large number of different locations, including inside the walls of heated buildings. We'll probably have four species that are going to be effected, and primarily that effect will be seen in the Western U.P. That's where they hibernate and that's where they're going to obtain it, probably."

It is not conclusive yet how the disease is spreading. Most scientists think it can be spread from bat to bat in large hibernating groups and also from people visiting and climbing in caves.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service and Forest Service and others think that that is plausible," Dr. Kurta said. "There are studies being done trying to determine whether or not you can actually transport it by people moving from cave to cave, but there is some evidence to suggest that that might be true, and that is the fact that the fungus jumps very rapidly from certain caves to other caves. Those caves, in both instances, happened to be caves that were favored by cavers, by spelunkers. So, its not a smoking gun but its enough to make you think, well, you know you might have expected it to be in all these little caves in

between. Why did it jump from this real nice cave to this real nice cave all of a sudden? So that's why the Fish and Wildlife Service has all sorts of restrictions on, if you have an endangered species permit. The Forest Service has closed all caves in the east to cavers for that reason. It's just precautionary. We dont know for certain, but there is this suggestion that it might be transported by people as well as by bats. So, the idea is to try to slow it down as much as possible."

The disease began in New York and has spread to caves in Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia, and is approximately 150 miles from Kentucky. Most scientists believe it will reach Michigan in approximately three years, as some Michigan bats go to areas in Kentucky to hibernate.

According to Dr. Kurta, many believe the disease originated in Europe, as recent tests show that a bat fungus there has the same genetic make-up as White Nose Syndrome, and that North American bats' behaviors may be different enough that they are affected more strongly by it, especially as North American bats tend to hibernate in large colonies. There are few large colonies in Europe. These scientists are still uncertain about how it could have gotten here.

One of the many problems in thwarting this disease is establishing what is causing it. The fungus was only classified as such this summer.

Dr. Karen Francl of Radford

University in Virginia has been researching and monitoring for signs of the disease in bats in Pennsylvania, where many caves have been infected.

"We do survey stuff, so I see the effects of it rather than what most people see during the winter, which is the actual white nose," she said. "I see a lot of damaged wing tissue, a lot of holes, a lot of tears, a lot of scars, just poor health in general, but the bats that I see don't necessarily have the white ring around their nose or anything like that. The white on their nose is a fungus and that only grows when they're in hibernation and their temperatures are lower. So by the time they come out of hibernation, the fungus is not at the right temperature to grow, but, obviously they've suffered because of it, or something linked to it. They tend to be very poor at repairing their own damaged tissue, or maybe not even be able to make healthy tissue."

Researchers are not yet sure if the fungus is causing the problems she sees, Dr. Francl said. "A lot of funguses are not necessarily the main agents for making animals sick. A lot of times, it's just something that's a byproduct that the animals' immune system is already low, which allows the fungus to come in and take residence."

Many of the impacts of significant bat population losses would be felt in the agricultural community, Dr. Francl noted.

"I would think that, in the long run, probably a lot of farmers -- everybody in the agricultural busi-

ness -- is going to be the group that's harmed the most," she said, "because, obviously, bats are a natural predator of a lot of insect pests for the crops, so having a huge market decline in bats is going to probably increase the need for human-made pesticides, which can get pricey and is not always a healthy alternative."

Another area of uncertainty is how Michigan, and other states, can keep the disease at bay.

"I think it's kind of being handled on a state-by-state basis as it's moving," she said, "but there are a lot of people that are worried about this. Places like Michigan, where it hasn't hit yet but it's expected to hit pretty soon. Until we find out what the causative agent is, we're kind of stuck sitting on our hands, trying to prevent spread as much as we can, but without knowing what the cause is, there's nothing that you can do that's proactive about it."

Many states, like Virginia, are blocking access to mines, hoping to halt the human spread of the disease, and researchers like Dr. Francl are taking extra precautions while studying bats, like disposing of gloves after handling each bat and bleaching equipment, but, thus far, there seems to be little people can do to prevent it from spreading between the bats themselves.

"It's hard to study them in caves, because they're all spread out up high," said Dale Smart of the Michigan Organization for Bat Conservation. "It's not easy, but it's [in nearly] 10 states now, in just a few years. But it may be that it's just

over in sites that were already infected. It's hard to say whether it's spreading rapidly."

Small amounts of federal funding were recently made available for research and prevention of White Nose Syndrome by the National Speleological Society. Scientists can now apply for an \$800,000 grant for syndrome research, but no other federal steps have been taken.

The state of Michigan does not have a biologist dedicated to bats, like many other states. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is beginning to block human access to many bat hibernation areas, and some unused mines in the western U.P. have been

closed to access.

Michigan is still in the preliminary stages of prevention. The DNR is arranging meetings this summer with out-of-state professionals and plans to send out a formal doctrine to all state departments in the fall.

The biggest step for Michigan is spreading awareness, Dr. Francl said, especially about the benefits that bats provide.

"Just, honestly, being aware that it's out there is good first step for a lot of people who aren't really understanding of bats that much and just understanding and appreciating what bats can do for us economically as well as ecologically," she said. "They're very important."

## Michigan Politics

By  
George Weeks



### Underdog With Gumption

Senator Tom George of Kalamazoo has yet to generate the bucks and buzz of more prominent contenders for the 2010 Republican nomination for governor. But he has credentials and gumption.

Gumption was evident last week when he managed to reverse the arrogant decision of the Michigan Taxpayers Alliance, initially accepted by the state party, to bounce him from the September 26 gubernatorial debate at the Republican Leadership Conference on Mackinac Island.

It's bizarre that the party would give to an outside organization the power to determine who could participate in a party function. In excluding him, the anti-tax alliance cited time limitations and, essentially, George's failure to click with the media.

After his eviction, George got on the horn to Republican State Chairman Ron Weiser and two GOP contenders, Congressman Pete Hoekstra of Holland and Ann Arbor businessman Rick Snyder.

George said the three helped in the reversal. In fact, Snyder Campaign Manager M. Dane Walters wrote Weiser: "This upcoming debate and the Republican Party should not be perceived as exclusionary or preferential. Without assurance that Senator George has been invited, we will seriously reconsider whether Rick Snyder should participate as well."

George was particularly grateful to Weiser in assuring that "fairness prevailed" at this early stage of the Republican primary fight, where George is a long shot to outpoll well-known and media-savvy contenders Hoekstra, Attorney General Mike Cox, and Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard. He lacks the resources and impressive staffing of the wealthy Snyder.

George, 52, is a former state representative who was elected to the Senate in 2002, and is well qualified to contribute to the current debate on health care. He's a medical doctor; past president of the Michigan Society of Anesthesiologists, and past director of Hospice of Greater Kalamazoo.

In fact, when I connected with him by phone Friday, he was in his scrubs waiting to deal with a couple of patients at one of the Kalamazoo hospitals where he practices when the Legislature is not in session.

"I'm a doctor," he said. "I know health care."

He also knows history, being past president of the Historical Society of Michigan and producer of a 1993 award-winning television documentary, "Lincoln in Kalamazoo."

So I was interested in his comments on Governor Jennifer Granholm's ill-advised move to scatter the states historical functions to the winds as part of her executive order to dismantle the Department of History, Arts and Libraries (HAL) at a claimed savings of \$2 million.

George says that the way Granholm configures the functions, the states push for "cultural tourism" would suffer.

While she has modified some aspects of her original action, George correctly says the current well-coordinated and effectively functioning operation of the Michigan Historical Center, which includes the Michigan Historical Museum and the State Archives, would "lose synergy."

Michigan has a huge budget problem. But not so huge as to make history of history.

Her order transfers some, but not all, of the Historical Centers functions to the Department of Natural Resources. The DNR is well set to administer museums. But the state archives?

Richard Fidler, a board member of the Traverse Area Historical Society, contends that the Historical Center "would be sacrificed" in order to have more funding available for the proposed Michigan Center for Innovation and Reinvention at Michigan State University that emphasizes technology and science, as favored by Granholm.

He said: "Closing and moving historical resources from the present Michigan Library will not save the state money. On the contrary, it will cost the state more, not less, to support a new institution."

#### Cox's Army of Ideas

Much of the attention at this early stage of the 2010 gubernatorial campaign has been on such issues of the day as the deadlocked budget talks in Lansing, and whether Michigan should take Gitmo detainees from the U.S. prison to be closed in Cuba.

A welcome addition for discussion is Cox's release last week of "Putting Michigan Back To Work: The First Steps," a 60-page document replete with economic and other ideas that will appeal to the Republican base but are worthy of a look beyond.

There will be time to compare these ideas with those other candidates from both parties. But I do not recall any more comprehensive sloop of ideas this early in a Michigan gubernatorial campaign.

#### Milliken State Park In Detroit?

At the outset of his 1969-82 reign as Michigan's longest-serving governor, Bill Milliken of Traverse City was criticized in some out-state newspapers for his support of directing much of the voter-approved Recreation Bond Issue funding to urban areas.

On Thursday, his emphasis on urban issues and numerous environmental initiatives, including public access to water resources in Detroit and elsewhere, were among factors cited by the Natural Resources Commission -- chaired by Keith Charters of Traverse City -- in voting unanimously to rename the 31-acre Tri-Centennial State Park and Harbor the William G. Milliken State Park and Harbor.

Assuming concurrence of the Natural Resources Trust Fund, of which Charters is a member, there will be a dedication ceremony at Michigan's 98th state park along the Detroit River late in October.

*George Weeks retired in 2006 after 22 years as political columnist for The Detroit News. His weekly Michigan Politics column is syndicated by Superior Features.*

## Committee Will Study Wind Turbine Use at Mackinaw City

By Jonathan Eppley

The Mackinaw City Village Planning Commission will form a committee to further discuss a wind turbine ordinance after its next regularly scheduled meeting later this month. The commission agreed at a special meeting Thursday, September 10, that more research is needed, outside of its normal twice-a-month, two-hour meetings, to adequately address the topic.

The goal is to expedite information gathering and to better guide the Planning Commission to pen an ordinance all eight commissioners feel comfortable approving.

"It's to gather information about specific technical things that need to be known about it," Village Manager Jeff Lawson said. "Normally, it's done just to consolidate some time to allow a small group to get into more detail of some of the technical issues and present it back so the whole board doesn't have to research the topics."

Commissioners were given a copy of a draft ordinance at the meeting and agreed to take that draft home to make notes and comments about how they would like to see such an ordinance applied to

Mackinaw City. When the commission reconvenes September 24, members of the committee will be selected. The wind turbine committee will address the notes and comments made by the Planning Commission.

"Our problem is to really to do our homework and not get involved in some issues that may slide past us that we later regret," commissioner John Riemer said.

The purpose of the ordinance is to allow installation of small residential and commercial turbines in the village while guiding construction, aesthetics, and public safety. If the ordinance is approved as a stand-alone ordinance, as it is written, it will allow for turbine installation in all zoned districts in the village, provided all provisions are met about noise, vibration, setback, ground clearance, communication signal interference, shadow flicker, avian risk, environmental impact, and safety.

Provisions in the first draft would require a turbine to be set back at least 1.25 times its total height from the nearest structure, a turbine cannot exceed 55 decibels audibly, and all electrical lines con-

nected to the turbine must be buried underground. Larger turbines' blades would require at least 50 feet of ground clearance and smaller blades would require 20 feet of clearance.

"The setbacks from buildings and property lines really drive the reality of where things can be built," Mr. Lawson said. "This ordinance really takes a lot of properties out of actuality with it, so, by default, a lot of properties in our residential district can't even have small turbines because they just don't have the setbacks on their property."

As the ordinance is written, however, a property owner without the minimum amount of land to meet setbacks can, through the Zoning Board of Appeals, get a neighboring property owner to sign a waiver to allow construction of such turbines.

The village only has regulations for large commercial turbines. They were drafted in 2001 to regulate the two turbines erected on the village's south side.

"We're in a much better position now because we can see what turbines look like, so we're not starting from scratch and not knowing anything about them," Mr. Lawson said. "Now we're trying to catch up with what's changed in the last 10 years in technology."

In other news, the commission unanimously approved a set of bylaws to outline meeting procedure, policy, and action. The state is requiring planning commissions in Michigan to adopt bylaws by 2011. The Mackinaw City Village Planning Commission has not had bylaws before and began its review of the five-page document in January.

"You have had time to go through this," commission chair Rob Most said to the rest of the commission. "You've done a terrific job on this."

The Planning Commission will meet next Thursday, September 24, at the Village Hall on South Huron Avenue at 7 p.m.

## Judge Sets Water Level on East Lake

By Michael Ayala

A water level of 4.9 feet was set for East Lake during a sparsely attended court hearing Friday, September 11. Judge William Carmody of the 11th Circuit Court set the level after hearing testimony from Ronald Hansen of the engineering and land surveying company Spicer Group.

The study examined the water levels from the late 1980s to 2009, Mr. Hansen testified, to determine an appropriate water level. Surveys of the surrounding land, dock and shore lines, and septic fields were also taken into consideration. The study also provides remedies other than a dam and a method to finance

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